

Mercury health effects.

Mercury is a serious environmental problem in Massachusetts and throughout the country. Fish from many lakes and ponds across the northeast have mercury levels high enough to make them unsafe to eat. Even some saltwater fish, like swordfish, have high levels of mercury. Exposure to mercury through skin contact, by eating contaminated fish or by breathing mercury fumes can cause serious health effects.

Mercury is poisonous to the nervous system, kidneys, liver and immune system.

There are several different types of mercury. Although some are more dangerous than others, all are toxic. Depending on the type and amount, exposures to mercury can damage the nervous system, brain, kidneys, liver and immune system. One form of mercury, methylmercury, is extremely poisonous and can damage the brain even at low levels of exposure. People may be exposed to this type of mercury by eating some types of fish. Elemental mercury, the silvery liquid found in some thermometers and switches, is most dangerous when inhaled and must be handled with care.

Children are most sensitive to mercury toxicity.

The developing brains and nervous systems of children are very sensitive to mercury and may be irreversibly damaged by it. Children can be exposed to methylmercury by eating certain types of fish. Breaking mercury-containing products such as thermometers used in homes and schools can also result in exposure to mercury.

Women who are pregnant or who may soon become pregnant should be particularly careful about mercury.

Children can be exposed to mercury in the womb if their mothers eat foods contaminated with this toxin. The National Academy of Science estimates that 60,000 children may be born each year in the United States with neurological problems due to exposure to mercury in the womb. The effects caused by this mercury exposure may be permanent and could lead to poor school performance and health problems.

Avoid mercury exposure.

Try to avoid purchasing products that contain mercury such as fever thermometers and thermostats. Handle any mercury containing products that you have with care. Follow state and national fish advisories.

Stop mercury from rising.

Brought to you by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and Department of Environmental Protection.

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